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THEOPHILE GAUTIER

The centenary of Théophile Gautier has come and gone. Last of the great Romanticists in France, the apostle of art for art's sake has received his secular garland. How many such tributes have we paid, since 1897, to the genius of French Romanticism! One after another came the anniversaries: Vigny, Balzac, Hugo, Sainte-Beuve, and George Sand. Only last year Alfred de Musset had his turn, and now it is the spirit of Gautier that we invoke, not without a retrospective envy of those prolific days.

We ought to be grateful to Théophile Gautier; every scribbler should honor him as a patron saint. He helped to create our modern dramatic and art criticism. He showed us a new way to write books of travel. And in the intervals of his labors, when the Sisyphean stone of journalism rested for a moment at the foot of the hill, he wrote exquisite poems and short stories. He was an artist, and he remained an artist, even in his newspaper work: he lived to write, as truly as he wrote to live.

Yet what a life for an artist! Gathered and published, Gautier's complete works would fill nearly three hundred volumes. He was indeed, like Dumas *père*, a galley-slave of the pen. It is true that all this labor gave him technique — that superlative technique for which he will always stand in the history of literature. Through all the exuberance or the banality of his early work we may trace that technique in the making, for we must remember that the flower of his poetry appeared when the poet was forty-seven. *Fit faber fabricando; Emaux et Camées* is surely worth all the labor that it cost. It is pure art, and one cannot but marvel at the energy shown in that long apprenticeship.

But Gautier was physically strong. A sickly boy, he made himself an athlete by incessant training. He was a Greek in his worship of the body and bodily force. The proudest act of his life, he confessed, was a feat of physical strength, a blow registered on a striking-machine at a fair. And Gautier bragged of it like a very boy. "I'm a strong man," he used to

say, when, in friendly argument, he wished to overwhelm his opponent; "I can punch five hundred and thirty pounds on a Turk's head, and write verses that have sequence. That is everything." And truly, without this exuberant physical vitality genius itself is of little avail.

Physical strength is fundamental. It may imply an ability to meet and overcome the difficult, as with Honoré de Balzac. It may imply a philosophic and unquerulous acceptance of one's destiny, as it did with Théophile Gautier. "I am the rightful heir of Gautier-sans-avoir" (Walter Penniless), he used to say. "Like him I have no fief or well-filled wallet, like him I am leading the Crusade toward the Holy Land of Literature, and like him I shall die on the way." He was a fatalist; slow of motion and phlegmatic, his temperament fully supports his claim to Oriental blood. Indeed, he was even compared to his beloved Persian cats, proud and indifferent, living for themselves alone.

Such a temperament was Gautier's good fortune. For if he was by nature indifferent, his contemporaries repaid his indifference in kind. His reputation is largely a posthumous one. It is hard for people to believe that genius is writing for a newspaper; and it is wellnigh impossible when the genius in question has been guilty of eccentricities. Gautier never lived down the red waistcoat of *Hernani*. Thirty-seven years after that night at the Théâtre français, Georg Brandes found in Paris people who believed that the poet still wore his *gilet rouge*. Thus the sin of his youth pursued him to the grave — and beyond, for was it not the principal feature of his centenary? Poor Gautier! The innovations of the Romantic School were forgotten long before Brandes came to Paris. Hugo had become a classic, *Hernani* a commonplace of literary history. But Mrs. Grundy never forgave the red waistcoat; that oriflamme of Romanticism barred him forever from the Academy. To the immortals it symbolized Gautier at his very worst: it meant for them the author of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

And on the whole we should not blame them. The Academy is part of the official hierarchy of Paris. It has a duty toward literature, but it has also a duty toward society. It reflects the

spirit of its time: witness the prudery of the second empire and the prosecution of Flaubert. But the times change, and we are changed with them; neither *Madame Bovary* nor *Mademoiselle de Maupin* seem so horrific to Parisian taste of to-day. In 1836, however, such a novel was more of an innovation; and besides this, the critics of the thirties had not only a novel but a preface to condone.

And what a preface! A boy of twenty-five, a young *rapin* recently converted to literature and Romantic individualism, Gautier put into these pages all the zeal of his conversion. He elaborated the doctrine of Art for Arts's sake; and scorning all the rules of literary joustings, he threw both his gauntlets into the faces of his critics. "No, imbeciles," he cries, "no, idiots and bagnecks that you are, a book will not make gelatine soup, a novel is not a pair of seamless boots"—and the tirade continues for a full page. "No, a novel has two uses, one material, the money that goes into the author's pocket, to ballast him against the devil and the wind that else might carry him away; the second spiritual, for when we are reading fiction, we are dozing and not reading useful newspapers. . . . Now, let anyone assert that novels do not contribute to civilization." This is a fair specimen of Gautier's invective, here directed against the utilitarianism of the age. Students of French history will recall the political theorizing of the thirties; a malady of Romantic speculation had invaded even practical life. Young men, disciples of Fourier and Saint-Simon, were everywhere in France dreaming of a socialistic millenium. Not so Théophile Gautier. This fiery young convert from the studios was dreaming of Art, Art with a capital A, free and independent of all ulterior things. And it was certainly to voice his revolt against conventional views of art and morality that he wrote *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

It is a curious book, this frankly immoral story. Swinburne called it "the golden book of spirit and sense—the holy writ of beauty." Other critics are rather less lyrical. Whatever it is, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is distinctly not *virginibus puerisque*, and only modern pagans should read it at all. Gautier was one, surely; if ever a man escaped from the actual world through

art, it was he. And the novel does but give us his point of view. "I am a man of Homeric times," says his hero, Albert, "and the world in which I live is not my world. I do not understand the society which surrounds one. Christ did not come for me; I am as much a pagan as Alcibiades or Phidias. I believe that earth is as fair as heaven, and I think that perfection of form is itself a virtue. Three things please me: gold, marble and purple; splendor, solidity, color. These are the substance of my dreams."

Albert, and still more Fortunio and Tiburce, give us Gautier's conception of his own character. He is an artist, but an artist totally devoid of feeling save in the realm of art. Sentiment, in Gautier, is absorbed in the vibration of the senses and the notation of sense-perceptions: his powers of feeling are purely æsthetic. With most of us, emotion is vitalized into action; for the heart seeks a living *raison d'être* beyond itself in our fellow-men. But these human and religious elements of character were denied to Gautier. Never was a modern artist less emotional, in spite of his moments of affected sentimentality; never was a Romanticist less like their common ancestor Rousseau. Indeed, he is far less a Romanticist than a Parnassian, especially in his later poems. He is a Parnassian in his objectivity. Ask poetry for emotion? Never! "Words that shine, words of light with rhythm and music," he said to Taine, "that is poetry. Poetry proves nothing, tells no story. The incomparable beginning of Hugo's *Ratbert*, for example, that is the Himalaya of the poet's art. There you will find all Italy with its blazonries, and it is built of nothing but words."

Rien que des mots! Well, not a little of Gautier's verse is nothing but words. But much of it is far more, despite the theories of its creator. Not his early love-lyrics, for there we see best his essential lack of spirituality; not the *Albertus*, his tribute to *Faust* and the German ballad, for that bit of mediævalism lives only in the vividness of its pictorial quality. Not even his *Comédie de la mort*, for that merely shows us to what depths of horror the cult of sense-impressions for their own sake may lead. All Baudelaire is foreshadowed in this poem, which pursues the grotesque down the slopes that lead

from Romance to the realm of decadence. No, after all, true art is selective, and Gautier only attained his finest poetry by forsaking the impression which is merely curious. A real poet, he soon recovered from this malady of the grotesque; he saw that the beautiful was to be his field. For himself, painter and poet, he knew "that the visible world existed," and aware now of the value of choice and compression, he transmuted that painter's vision into the vivid octosyllabics of his *Emaux et Camées*. How much the cameo can teach its graver! This little volume too is nothing but words, but with these words Gautier can paint a picture, carve a statue, evoke the very image of a visible art.

With his fiction, unfortunately, the poet was less successful. The writing of verse is in itself an apprenticeship, but the fiction of the Romantic School had — alas! no such curb or guiding rein. Here too, as in his verse, he dabbled awhile with motives of *macabre* interest, inspired by *The Monk*, *Mephistophiles* and *Hoffmann*. All the Romanticists read *Hoffmann*, and Gautier, the youngest of the band, read him in all the imaginative glamor of nineteen. Hence his long infatuation with the Hoffmannesque story; hence too those little masterpieces, *Arria Marcella* and *La Morte Amoureuse*. But the beauty of these tales is after all a *macabre* beauty, and we pay for them by such puerilities as *Avator* and *Spirite*. Indeed, the best of Gautier's fiction falls far below *Emaux et Camées*. Even the famous *Capitaine Fracasse*, which shows the author in his later objectivity, is less a novel than a series of brilliant descriptions, and after his characters are sketched in, the interest of the novel perceptibly weakens. He is better in the short stories; the development of a real character was to him impossible. Himself indeed he could paint, as he did in the heroes of his early fiction, and he can outline upon his tapestries of description the most vividly characterized of silhouettes. But these clever outlines are not human beings, and, unlike *Omphale*, they never come to life for us or move us to the miracle of love.

So too with Gautier's essays in literary criticism. Here again we find silhouettes or autobiography; or, if he can combine the two methods in some sympathetic subject, so much the

better. Such a group he found ready for his pen in *Les Grotesques*, usually considered his masterpiece in this *genre*. Such a figure he also found in the eccentric person of his contemporary Baudelaire. But on the whole, Gautier's criticism might be likened to a series of etchings in dry-point. The carefully studied portrait, like the novel, requires a broad human nature and a gift of sympathy far beyond this master of literary technique.

A fundamental deficiency, surely. But is it not the price Gautier paid for his exclusive devotion to the world of visible beauty? Is it not the obverse of his marvellous talent in expression? He stood for 'impassibility,' for 'art for art's sake,' ignoring the fact that the things of this world have no meaning apart from our poor humanity. The visible world exists, but it exists only in the eye of man. And the eye of man is no mere camera obscura. Deep within the mind, we carry each one of us our vision of things, but the elements of that vision are profoundly modified by individual passion and artistic choice. Gautier, as a theorist, believed in the impassibility of the artist. But carry the theory to its logical conclusion, imagine a mind, if such were possible, as coldly unselective as a camera, and the impassibility of the artist would be the impossibility of art.

Happily, Gautier escaped this fate, as every artist must escape it, by his passion for beauty. It is true that he came to consider humanity on a lower plane than art. He shows it in all his work, even his travel books; *Tra los Montes* has been described as 'Spain without the Spaniards.' To him, a poet and a Romanticist, a dreamer eager to behold the Spain of chivalry, the poverty of modern Spanish life did not appeal. There were still, to be sure, the gorgeous costumes of the bull-fighters, but how little that was in comparison with all the splendors of the past! At every step the poet lost an illusion; at every step he noted the disappearance of local costume and the advent of Paris styles. "It will soon be impossible," he exclaims, "to tell a Russian from a Spaniard; all the world will be alike. Then an immense ennui will seize upon the universe; suicide will decimate the population of the globe. For curiosity is the prime motive of life, and curiosity will be gone."

A dreadful prophecy, and we shall not pause to consider whether its non-fulfilment indicates our artistic degeneration. Let us take it solely for the confirmation it affords of Gautier's purely æsthetic interest in humanity. Disillusionized, our pilgrim turned his eyes toward the world of things, the visible world of beauty that was ever his consolation. He visited the churches and the galleries; he revelled in the physical beauty of the land. In the Alhambra he passed "the four happiest days of his life," peopling its trefoiled arcades with the creatures of his fancy. To the poet indeed, Spain seemed a spiritual fatherland, an actual background for his dreams. And this beloved Spain he sets before us as by the painter's brush-work, albeit we have to watch the picture in the making:—

"A spectacle inconceivable to the people of the north, is the Alameda at the setting of the sun. The Sierra Nevada, whose rugged outline enfolds the city from this side, takes on tints that one cannot imagine. All the escarpments, all the summits, turn pink beneath the light, a dazzling pink, ideal, fairy-like, frosted with silver, shot through with iris and opal reflections, which would turn to mud the brightest colors of the palette; tints of mother-of-pearl, transparencies of ruby, veins of agate and gold-spangled glass, such as would shame all the fairy jewelry of the Arabian nights. The valleys, the ravines, the broken surfaces, all the spots not reached by the setting sun, are blue — a blue that might vie with the azure of the sky or of lapis-lazuli or sapphire. The tonal contrast between the light and shade is prodigious, the mountain seems to have put on an immense mantle of changeable silk, sprinkled and ribbed with silver. Little by little the splendid colors fade, they melt into semi-violet, the shadow invades the lower slopes, the light withdraws to the lofty peaks, and when all the plain is in darkness the silver crown of the Sierra still glitters in the sky beneath the farewell kisses of the sun."

It would be interesting to examine this bit of word painting, rich as the stuffs the great Venetians loved, and to dwell upon Gautier's position as the painter of Romanticism and the father of Impressionism in literature. It would be interesting to consider whether such a mode of writing can endure, since every style that uses metaphor is subject to the eternal laws of change.

But we must bring our *Ave atque Vale* to a close. We must say good-bye to Gautier; for the passing of his centenary gives the world a license to forget him for a hundred years. The world will pay its tribute to his descendants, to poets like Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle and Hérédia: it is still paying tribute, in its prose, to that cult of the epithet which Gautier introduced and which was elaborated by Flaubert and the Goncourts. To all these, and to Swinburne and Pater and many others beyond the borders of France, Gautier passed on the torch of a purer devotion to art; the range of his influence is visible in the garland of memorial verses published soon after he passed away. And that influence is still perceptible: the poet knows a poet's immortality. For death cannot touch his finest poems; of *Emaux et Camées* one might indeed say what Gautier himself so well said of art:—

All passes. Yet no dust,
No death, on Art shall fall:
The bust
Outlasts the Roman wall.

And the rude coin of bronze
The ploughman finds—O fame!
And cons,
Reveals a Cæsar's name.

Even the gods have passed,
But sovran verse alone
Shall last,
Stronger than bronze or stone.

Carve, chisel, then, or ply
The graver, fix your dream
For aye
In the tough metal's gleam.

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